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Setbacks Hinted At Peace Talks

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Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS, Dec. 7—Presidential adviser Henry Kissinger and Hanoi's chief negotiator Le Duc Tho held a four-hour private meeting today and scheduled another session for Friday.

But not even their parting handshake this evening could dispell the suddenly pessimistic public climate that today surrounded the renewed effort to reach a rapid Vietnam cease-fire.

Symptomatic of the mood was the discrepancy between apparently officially inspired French media reports early in the morning reporting an agreement was about to be signed and later Communist charges at the formal public peace conference that negotiations were deadlocked.

Even the previously steadfast American line of optimism took on an almost pleading tone of realism as Heyward Isham, acting U.S. delegate to the formal peace talks, said:

"We should not permit disappointments and setbacks in the pace of the final negotiations to prevent us from displaying an unchanged and unchangeable intention to achieve peace."

In the face of renewed Communist charges at the 169th session of the formal talks



MRS. NGUYEN THI BINH
... issues warning

that the United States and South Vietnam were to blame for the deadlock, U.S. press spokesman David Lambertson said, without any further explanation: "We remain confident that an accord acceptable to all parties will be reached relatively soon."

Officially, both the United States and North Vietnam maintained a news blackout on the secret talks which resumed Monday after a nine-

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day interruption. The talks today took place in a suburban villa at Gif-Sur-Yvette, south of Paris, which once belonged to the late painter Fernand Leger and now is the property of the French Communist Party.

However, North Vietnam implicitly confirmed that it had hardened its position on the key problem of releasing political prisoners held by Saigon in reaction to recent American demands for revision of key elements of the draft cease-fire accord originally worked out here in October.

Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, the chief Vietcong delegate, berated Isham for "deliberately omitting" the problem of these prisoners' release and warned that unless it was solved there "can be no correct and equitable solution in South Vietnam."

Although reported two weeks ago, neither side had been willing to confirm or deny the mutual escalation of demands until today. The very admission of the hardened Hanoi stance did not appear to suggest early resolution of the key problem.

In essence, the North Vietnamese raised the political prisoner issue, estimating their number at around 300,000, in reaction to South Vietnamese demands that Hanoi withdraw its troops—estimated oddly enough at the same strength—from the South as part of the cease-fire accord.

North Vietnam has never explicitly acknowledged the presence of its troops in South Vietnam as such. Indeed, it has rejected withdrawal demands and steadfastly main-

tained that any Vietnamese had the right to fight anywhere on Vietnamese soil against "foreign aggressors," meaning the United States and its allies.

When Hanoi revealed a version of the nine-point draft cease-fire accord on Oct. 28, Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's top negotiator at the formal peace talks, said that North Vietnam had agreed to drop its earlier demand for a simultaneous release of American prisoners of war it held and of political prisoners detained by Saigon.

The original draft accord left the release of these political prisoners to be decided by the Vietcong and Saigon government in deliberations after the cease-fire. For all intents, this arrangement appeared to allow the Saigon regime to delay their release for months, although it was learned in early November that the United States had undertaken verbally to oblige South Vietnam to free the political prisoners within 90 days of a cease-fire.

Nguyen Thanh Le, the North Vietnamese press spokesman, today justified demands that the United States and Saigon release the imprisoned men on the ground that this position "corresponds perfectly with the realities of the present time." Earlier, he noted that the United States had demanded "central and substantial" changes of its own.

In seeming contrast to Communist charges of pessimism and the new American air of realism, South Vietnam

phrased its demands for changes in the draft accord in the most unusually moderate language.

Acting Saigon delegate Nguyen Xuan Phong said: "Never before were the chances for peace as great as they are at the present time."

More specifically, Saigon has dropped its earlier language demanding "formal as-

surances" of a North Vietnamese troop withdrawal. Phong simply said the North Vietnamese "should decide to withdraw back to North Vietnam all their troops currently operating in South Vietnam."

In wording which suggested a possible way round the troop withdrawal impasse, he noted that "with regard to problems between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, they should be settled without difficulty on the basis of mutual respect and reciprocal non-interference."

However, Nguyen Minh Vy, Hanoi's deputy negotiator, said that Saigon's demands for some form of North Vietnamese commitment on troop withdrawal had "again forced the negotiations into deadlock."

Ly Van Sau, the Vietcong press spokesman, charged that the negotiations were making no progress. Although he refused to comment on the mood of the secret talks, he noted that his delegation considered both the private and semi-public meetings as all part of the same negotiations.

The subdued mood of the day was further reinforced by French Foreign Minister Maurice Schumann's failure to comment on the luncheon to which he invited Kissinger today at the French Foreign Ministry.

Schumann, who flew to and from the NATO ministerial session in Brussels for the luncheon is well known for his aversion to pessimism. Only two weeks ago, after a luncheon with Kissinger, he warned against pessimistic reports that the secret talks had run into serious difficulties. One day later the talks were adjourned.

It was suggested that Schumann's silence was because of wildly optimistic early morning French media reports of an impending settlement here. Two newspapers, including the conservative newspaper Le Figaro, had front-page headlines saying the two delegations were on the verge of agreement. Agence France Presse, the French news service said: "An agreement may be concluded at any moment after today's secret session."

The government-controlled radio embellished on these reports until Mrs. Binh, the chief Vietcong delegate scotched them in mid-morning.